

Hackney Trades Union Council

Campaign newsletter

Founded 1900

December 2002

Defend the Hackney Anti-racist Three

ON Wednesday 4 December branch officers of Hackney Unison intended to present a draft report on racism to Hackney council's race equality scrutiny group. The intention was to allow the council to comment on the draft before it was finalised and sent to the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). We understand that the report argued that the council has continued in its racist discriminatory employment practices and that the council had failed to comply with a non-discrimination notice already served by the CRE in 2000.

It is believed that the report also contains criticism of the Council for having an inadequate race equality action plan and that it calls on the CRE to seek a high court injunction restraining the council from further breaches of the Race Relations Act. On the afternoon of December 4th, the council phoned the national union office and threatened to sue for defamation unless the report was withdrawn. As it remained in a

draft form, and had only been tabled for the council's comments Unison agreed to its withdrawal.

On Wednesday 11 December Hackney council suspended the Unison trade union's joint branch secretaries Brian Debus and Will Leng and the Equalities Officer, John Page. While the specific allegations against each of them vary in form, essentially they are alleged to have distributed the draft report, and in so doing have disclosed matters that the council believes they should have kept 'confidential'.

John Page has a further allegation arising from his union representation of a number of women who had complained of bullying and sexual harassment by their manager. Following numerous failings in the council's response to the women's grievances (including threatening to sack one of the women), and what appeared to be a wilful refusal by managers at any level in the

organisation to follow council procedures, he wrote, in his role as Equalities Officer, to the elected Mayor requesting that their concerns be properly addressed.

Only in Hackney could this perfectly proper action of a trade union representative be considered gross misconduct!

The council has made it plain that it intends to dismiss all three branch officers.

The threatened dismissals, if carried out, will be an act of victimisation as defined by the Race Relations Act and will be unfair dismissals on the basis of whistleblowing and trade union activities. The council is well aware of this and is apparently willing to pay whatever it costs at employment tribunal in the hope that they will at least silence the criticism of racism in the borough. This is a challenge to the whole of the trade union movement, as well as undermining the right to challenge racism.

Campaign support meeting

Hackney Trades Union Council called a 50 strong support campaign meeting on Monday 16 December. Present were a number of Unison Branch Secretaries from across London, and representatives of numerous black workers groups. Speakers from Hackney black and minority ethnic community organisations within the borough voiced their support and others have sent personal messages. Speaker's offered advice, support and office space to the campaign to get Brian, Will and John back to work, and to get the CRE to enforce its non-discrimination notice.

Council workers protest

Despite the inevitable shock and accompanying fear resulting from the council's actions, council workers have already made public protests at the suspensions. On Thursday 19 December, Hackney Unison called a lunchtime lobby on the town hall steps to protest at the suspension of the branch officers. A request for an industrial action ballot has also been made. In a number of workplaces workers have already met and voted for strike action.

Out on the streets

Supporters were out on the streets of Dalston and 'the Narrow way' in the heart of Hackney on Saturday 21 December petitioning and publicising these issues. There is massive goodwill towards the Unison activists, who are well known in the community, for their commitment to fighting racism, their defence of community services, and their fearless challenges to what has been labelled by the Audit Commission as the worst performing council in the country.

Call on the CRE to enforce the non-discrimination notice

Some of the messages of support received so far...

Unfortunately I cannot attend the meeting in January, please convey my full support to the campaign

Tony Benn

I'm appalled by the suspensions. This Council has an appalling record of mismanagement, of refusing to accept criticism, and of scapegoating and victimising its workforce. You are right to raise concerns at racist practices, and particularly so given Hackney's record of CRE investigations in the past. This attack exemplifies the contempt that the Council has for its workforce, its trade unions and the residents of Hackney.

Liz Davies, former Labour Party NEC member

Operation Black Vote is deeply disturbed that three members of Unison have been suspended for highlighting continued racism within the Local authority. Such an action clearly demonstrates the council's unwillingness to face up to its responsibilities and effectively tackle racism. OBV supports whole heartedly the rights of the Unison workers to highlight and challenge Institutionalised racism. We will put this issue on our website to inform others and offer support where ever we can.

Simon Woolley, National Co-ordinator, Operation Black Vote

Action against Racism cannot and should not be silenced and therefore I pledge my full support to the above UNISON members.

Raph Parkinson, UNISON NEC Member (personal capacity).

I want to add my name to those protesting about the suspensions of Hackney Unison officers. I am confident Unison will support the Hackney officers who are rightly drawing attention to institutional racism in Hackney.

Dorothy Macedo, chair London APF Committee

Islington UNISON gives it full support to Hackney branches fight against racism. we congratulate John, Brian and Will in their determination to expose racism in Hackney we condemn the Hackney Council's attack on UNISON officers doing their job when they should be tackling the racism of some senior officers.

Andrew Berry, Deputy Branch Secretary

As a Hackney resident I am appalled that a so called Labour Council could take such action. Rather than victimising union members Hackney council should be debating this issue out in the open. The council should conduct an open inquiry into the issue rather than attempting to silence critics with threats of sacking.

Dr Andrew Strouthous

These committed trade unionists should be commended for their continued fight against racism in workplace and across Hackney, instead of victimised by Hackney Council. I have also passed on news of this disgusting treatment to fellow trade unionists and Unison members in other branches. I wish you well in your fight, and should you need help (although I'm based in Scotland), please do not hesitate to contact me.

Angela Paton, GMB Scotland - East Ayrshire Branch

Please accept support on behalf of RCN at the Homerton hospital.

Charlie Atalotis RCN steward

I write to condemn the total unwarranted and unjustified victimisation of members of Hackney UNISON for taking up the campaign against discrimination against black workers and against institutionalised racism.

Bernard Regan, National Union of Teachers, National Executive Member (Inner London)

We support you in your struggle with Hackney Council.
University of Greenwich branch of NATFHE

Hackney Socialist Alliance will do whatever we can to help build the fight back. If they think this is the best way to suppress the report, then they are gravely mistaken.

Hackney Socialist Alliance

I'm extremely sorry to hear about what has happened and I am happy to do whatever is necessary.

Organiser, The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO)

I hope you are successful in your fight against a blatant injustice.
Atalotis Charalambos

The actions of Hackney Council are absolutely disgraceful and unforgivable. For a Labour Council to attack and victimise trades union representatives rather than investigate complaints of racism is beyond the pale.

Labour Councillor, RBKC

I am a research officer emailing from Staffordshire and I know only too well how reactive the statutory sector becomes around issues of 'race'. I sincerely hope heads roll for this and that the CRE can enforce the RRAA.

Diane Dunlevey

Messages of protest to...

Messages of protest can be sent to:

Claer Lloyd-Jones
Hackney's Director of Law and Probity
claer.lloyd-jones@hackney.gov.uk
or fax 0208 356 3657

Head of Human Resource Management
Pam Case
pcase@gw.hackney.gov.uk

Jules Pipe (Mayor)
mayor@hackney.gov.uk

Some of the messages of support received so far...

I read on the LabourNet UK website about the suspension of three of your branch activists for blowing the whistle on racism in Hackney Council, and just wanted to send a brief message of support. To respond to serious complaints of racism by trying to intimidate the whistle-blowers is shocking and shameful (not to mention probably illegal). Well done for making a stand; please keep comrades in Unison updated and let us know if we can help. No justice, no peace!

Ben Drake, steward, York City UNISON

Remember: What goes around, comes around .
UNISON Steward, Archway and Royal Free

I read with astonishment your email. It seems to me that these tactics can only be interpreted as an attempt to silence you and create a climate of fear.

Dr George Paizis, French Dept, UCL, AUT exec comtte, in personal capacity

I am writing to express my support for Brian, Will and John and also to express my disgust about what has happened.

Steve Cawley, Unison Steward, Newham Housing Department.

The management of Hackney council which was recently reported to be one of the worst performing councils in the UK has reacted in fear. Use the full force of the law to fight this. I am surprised that a borough which houses a number of clearly identifiable racial groups should be home to such a disagreement.

Professor Ijeoma F. Uchegbu, University of Strathclyde

We in the International Socialist Organisation send you our strongest unreserved protest over this matter and have written to the council to demand that they immediately withdraw the threats of legal action and begin the process of taking steps to end racist discrimination in Hackney Council. If they fail to do so, we will look at staging a demonstration outside the British Embassy in Harare in protest at and to bring attention to, the racism in your country.

International Socialist Organisation Zimbabwe

We are all with you!

N Venetti, Unison Chair, Regional Diversity Forum

Please accept this message of support from Goldsmiths UNISON in your struggle to gain the re-instatement of Brian Will and John.
Pete Weller, Branch Secretary, Goldsmiths UNISON

Please pass on my solidarity message to the three union members concerned and let me know what else I can do to raise the issue more widely.

Jane Nellist, Joint Divisional Secretary, Coventry NUT

People from all backgrounds in Hackney will not continue to tolerate such behaviour. The council has a dreadful record on racism. Everyone in this office could quote examples of people they knew who had suffered racism (and often cases that had won at tribunal).

Lorna Solomon, Patchwork Community HA, Unison Shop Steward (personal capacity)

Keep up the fight. Don't let them get away with it. Stop racism!
Lot van Baarenkaderlid AbvaKabo FNV (public sector), Netherlands

I just wanted to add my support for Brian and his colleagues that were suspended. It seems that the Council are intent on destroying any form of democracy within the council ..

Lesley MacKinnon, Librarian

We will be right behind you with dosh at least if not more active and visible measures. Unconditionally guaranteed. I'm sure you don't need telling about imminent strike action at Kingsland School. Looks like its Hackney's turn to be at the eye of the storm. We have nothing to lose but our subservience.

Nick GRANT, Asst-Sec, Ealing NUT

As vice chair of the National Association of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority Councillors I find the matter rather disturbing
Cllr. Rabi Martins, Watford

Hackney Council have proved they have no shame in attacking Union officials who are trying to fight the cancer of racism. I offer my full support for their struggle for full reinstatement and in their efforts to root out racism in Hackney Council.

Mr Sasha Simic, USDAW Shop Steward, (Personal Capacity)

Messages of support to...

Messages of support for the local branch can be sent to:
hackney.unison@unisonfree.net
or fax 0208 985 6749

Messages of support to the Unison regional office can be sent to:
Eddy Coulson
e.coulson@unison.co.uk or fax 0207 535 2105

Please also write to the CRE asking them to take action to enforce the non-discrimination notice

Messages to the CRE should be sent to
Paul Riddell
Commission for Racial Equality
email info@cre.gov.uk
or fax 020 7939 0001

The Audit Commission agrees with Unison's conclusion

Is the council complying with the Non Discrimination Notice? In answering this question Unison and the Audit Commission appear to be in agreement. On Thursday 12 December, the Audit Commission issued its comprehensive performance review. It stated '*In response to a non-discrimination notice placed by the Commission for Racial Equality, the council devised a five year action plan in 2001 and produced a Race Equality Strategy (RES) in May 2002.*

The quality of the plans is fair, but corporate performance targets for the RES have yet to be agreed and the collection and monitoring of equalities information to support the action plan is fragmented and unreliable across the council. The Phoenix Programme is a positive project to develop black and visible minority staff within the council, but the lack of clear outcome information on the progress of staff undertaking the programme reduces the confidence of participants in its ability to deliver change.

– Hardly a ringing endorsement!

Brief background to racism in Hackney

1984 Hackney was served with its first 'non-discrimination notice' by the Commission for Racial Equality for persistent acts of discrimination.

1986 Black workers in Hackney stage a protest march against racism.

1987 Publication of Arden report into freemasonry and corruption in the council

1993-1996 CRE becomes satisfied that the council has discriminated on racial grounds against its black and ethnic minority staff

1996 The council sends a list of workers with 'African sounding' names to the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office, leading to numerous workers of African origin being harassed on the unfounded suspicion that they are illegal immigrants.

1997 Lincoln Crawford QC finds evidence of widespread discrimination; in particular; 'No disciplinary action was taken against those managers responsible for discriminating against visible minority staff.'

1998 During the Transforming Hackney era, black women are unlawfully prevented from returning to work from maternity leave. Unison obtains support from the EOC to successfully challenge this malpractice.

1998 CRE serves 'draft' non-discrimination notice on the council.

2000 Hackney Unison produces report into racism in Hackney and lobbies successfully for the CRE to serve a second formal non-discrimination notice.

2002 Unison drafts a second report to CRE asserting that the non-discrimination notice is not being adhered to and that the CRE should take further enforcement action. The draft is sent to the employer for their comments in advance of publication. The response is to threaten to sack three Unison branch officers.

After over 20 years of CRE involvement and record numbers of employment tribunal cases, it must be time for the CRE to take further enforcement action against Hackney!

Support campaign events

- Hackney TUC is organising a campaign meeting **Tuesday 7 January** at 7.30 at the Aspinall and Marcon community hall on Amhurst Road (Junction with Marcon Court), London E8.
- Unison are organising an emergency branch meeting (Hackney Unison members only) on Thursday 16 January at the Bullion Rooms, behind the Town Hall, Mare Street.
- Hackney TUC in association with local anti-racist organisations are calling a public anti-racist forum to be held on **Monday 20 January** at 8pm at the Hackney Empire Bullion Rooms Mare Street, Hackney, London E8.
- A high profile ant-racist concert/festival in the borough is being planned by local musicians and artists associated with Soulfood.
- There are proposals to host our own 'public enquiry' (including hosting a 'video box') where people can give evidence of the racism they have experienced from Hackney council.
- To invite speakers from the campaign, please email hackney.unison@unisonfree.net

Money needed!

Donations needed for the campaign. We aim to ensure that this campaign attracts national media attention, please ensure that we have the resources to mount the campaign.

Over £1,200 has already been committed to the campaign

Donations should be made payable to 'Hackney Trades Union Council'. or you can make a bank transfer (08-60-01. Account no: 59109570)

Hackney Trades Union Council
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High Street, London E8 2NS.
Tel: 07960 798399.